



Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program

MA Natural Heritage & Endangered Species
Program
Division of Fisheries & Wildlife
Route 135
Westborough, MA 01581
(508)792-7270, ext. 200

MASSACHUSETTS ENDANGERED WILDLIFE

Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*)

DESCRIPTION: The Peregrine Falcon is the fastest bird on earth, capable of diving from great heights at speeds of up to 200 miles per hour. It is a beautiful raptor with long, pointed wings and a long, slightly rounded tail. Adults have a bluish-gray to slate-gray backside and a buffy white underside interspersed with black. Adults also possess a black crown, black moustache-like markings or "sideburns", a white throat, a dark bill with a prominent yellow fleshy base (or cere), and yellow legs and feet. Immature Peregrines have a brown backside and heavily streaked underside. Peregrines are medium-sized falcons; males are slightly smaller than a crow (0.4 to 0.45 m (15 to 18 inches) in length) with a wingspan of 0.9 to 1.1 m (35 to 42 inches), while females are slightly larger than a crow, reaching a length of 0.45 to 0.5 m (18 to 20 in.) with a wingspan of 1.1 to 1.2 m (42 to 48 in.).

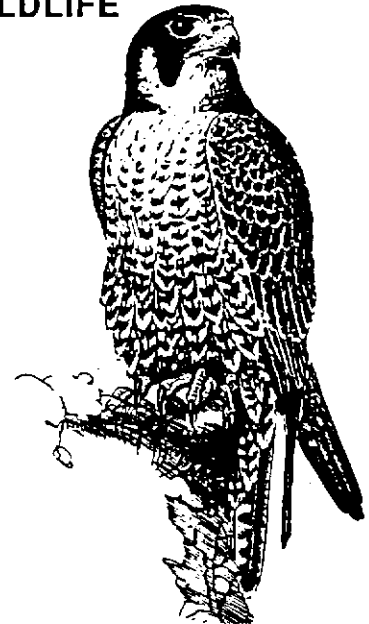
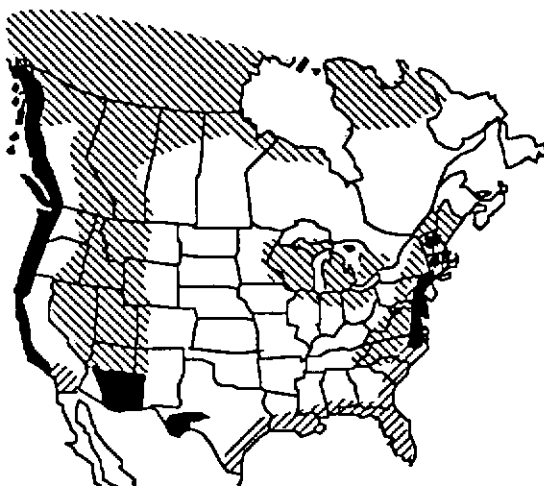





Illustration by Frank Taylor, from the
Raptor Research and Rehabilitation
Program pamphlet 1988

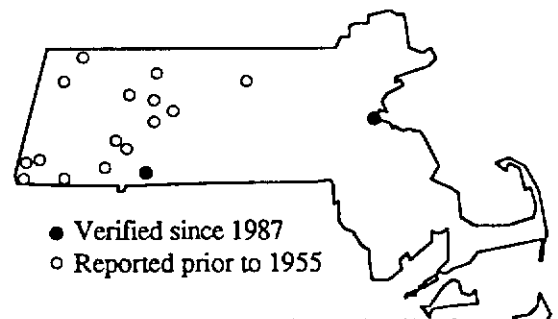
SIMILAR SPECIES IN MASSACHUSETTS: The only falcon which might be confused with the Peregrine Falcon is the Merlin (*Falco columbarius*). However, the Merlin is smaller than the Peregrine (0.25 to 0.35 meters, or 10 to 14 inches), does not have the Peregrine's dark "sideburns", and possesses a conspicuously banded tail. Furthermore, the Merlin's habitat consists of coniferous forests adjacent to open clearings, which is substantially different from Peregrine habitat. Merlins do not breed in Massachusetts but pass through the state during migration and overwinter in small numbers.



Range of Peregrine Falcon in North America
(reintroduced at various sites within its former
breeding range in the eastern U.S.)

-  Winter range
-  Summer (breeding) range
-  Year-round range

(continued overleaf)



Massachusetts Breeding Distribution
by Town

(Peregrine Falcon, continued)

HABITAT IN MASSACHUSETTS: The Peregrine Falcons which currently breed in Massachusetts utilize artificial nesting platforms high up on tall buildings in heavily urbanized areas (Boston and Springfield). Historical Peregrine nesting sites (eyries) within Massachusetts were located on rocky cliffs. In general, Peregrine Falcons prefer to nest on cliffs overlooking a body of water, but they will occasionally nest on skyscrapers, towers, and bridges.

RANGE: The Peregrine Falcon is one of the most widely distributed birds in the world, inhabiting every continent except Antarctica. Unfortunately, the species has substantially declined world-wide, due primarily to the effects of the pesticide DDT. In North America, Peregrines once bred from Alaska and northern Canada to Georgia and California. They are now largely restricted to breeding in Alaska, Canada, and the western United States. All of the breeding Peregrine Falcons in the eastern half of the U.S. were extirpated by 1966. Reintroduction efforts beginning in 1975 resulted in the establishment of over 80 breeding pairs in the East by the end of 1990. Greater numbers of Peregrine Falcons can be seen in the East during migration, which peaks in early October.

LIFE CYCLE / BEHAVIOR: Peregrine Falcons migrate to their nesting sites in early March. They often use the same nest site year after year, and mate for life. Peregrines do not actually build a nest; they only scrape out a shallow hollow for the eggs in order to prevent them from rolling off the cliff or skyscraper where they are laid.

The female Peregrine normally lays 2 to 6 (typically 4) creamy brown eggs sometime in April or May; the eggs are incubated by both parents until they hatch 28 to 32 days later. If the first clutch of eggs is destroyed, a second clutch is usually laid.

Young Peregrines begin to fly 30 to 40 days after hatching, but do not breed until they are three years old. The two breeding pairs of Peregrines within Massachusetts overwinter in the state, but Peregrine Falcons from higher latitudes migrate to South America in late August to October for the duration of the winter.

Peregrine Falcons in Massachusetts prey primarily on starlings and high-flying migratory birds; they may also hunt pigeons, blue jays, shorebirds, robins, and many other small to medium-sized birds. Peregrines prefer to catch their prey in flight by diving into them at tremendous speeds and killing them with their sharp talons.

POPULATION STATUS: The Peregrine Falcon is listed as an Endangered Species at both the state and federal levels; approximately 15 historic (all before 1955) breeding sites and only 2 current breeding sites have been documented for this species in Massachusetts. None of the historic eyries is currently utilized.

Peregrine Falcons once inhabited the Berkshires as well as the Housatonic and Connecticut River valleys until the 1950's, when the insecticide DDT began to be widely used. DDT contaminated thousands of insects and fish, which were then ingested by birds, which in turn were eaten by Peregrine Falcons; as a result, high concentrations of DDT built up inside the Peregrines' bodies.

DDT prevented female Peregrines from metabolizing enough calcium to produce hard eggshells, so the eggs usually broke when the parents tried to incubate them. Consequently, the Peregrine Falcon population in the United States suffered a sudden and catastrophic decline, resulting in the total extirpation of the species from the eastern United States. The last breeding pair in Massachusetts was seen in 1955.

Beginning in the mid-1970's, captive breeding programs and reintroduction efforts have restored the Peregrine Falcon to some small areas of its former range in the U.S., but there is still a very long way to go before the Peregrine approaches its former status. In Massachusetts, young captive-bred Peregrines were released in Boston in 1984 and 1985, and in Amherst in 1988. A pair of Peregrines has successfully bred in Boston, and another pair has bred in Springfield; both pairs have laid eggs this year. Nearly two dozen breeding pairs have also been established in northern New England and New York. DDT was banned in 1972, but small amounts are still present in the environment. There are also other threats to the Peregrine Falcon, primarily human disturbance of nesting sites which may cause a breeding pair to abandon its nest, collisions with airplanes, and predation on nestlings by Great Horned Owls.